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ABSTRACT

Parents' reactions to the attractiveness of children and the influence of children's gender on parents' reactions were investigated. It was expected that, when rating attractive children, parents would give higher evaluations and have greater expectations than when rating unattractive children. It was further expected that parents would exhibit gender-based differences in their evaluations. Participating were 20 male and 33 female parents of preschool and elementary school children. A supplemental group of 38 male and 37 female nonparent adults was included for comparison purposes. Each participant read four short dialogues to which a color photograph of a preschool child was attached. Dialogues depicted children engaged in high or low rates of activity, friendliness, independence, aggression, and honesty. The photographs depicted equal numbers of male and female children with no obvious disfigurements; in addition, none of the children wore glasses. Subjects were asked to rate each child according to a 36-item attribution questionnaire that included nine items assessing raters' expectations of the child's future success. Analyses of variance yielded numerous results. Overall, findings provided evidence that some differential attributions were made of attractive and unattractive preschoolers. This was especially so when children were depicted as acting cooperatively and in a nonaggressive, friendly manner; when children were depicted as dishonest, cruel, or antisocial, attractiveness was less important. (RH)

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"Don't Act Ugly!": Parents' Attractiveness-Based Judgments of Preschool Children

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A common parental admonition to children, especially in the southern United States, is "Don't act ugly!" Langlois and Stephan (1981) have theorized that statements such as this are examples of how parents use their children's attractiveness levels in socialization practices. That is, Langlois and Stephan (1981) suggest that physical attractiveness stereotypes are so powerful that even parents differentially socialize their own offspring on the basis of attractiveness.

Certainly Langlois and Stephan's (1981) assertion has support in research on non-parent adults' reactions to children. For instance, children's teachers tend to rate attractive children as more intelligent, popular with peers and likely to achieve more education than unattractive children (e.g. Adams, 1978). Indeed, unattractive children seem to be expected by teachers to be more aggressive, ill-mannered and deficient in school work.

Research on other non-parent adults has generally confirmed the findings for teachers. For instance, Dion (1972) found that adult women attributed chronic anti-social behavioral dispositions to unattractive, compared with attractive, 7-year-olds after reading a brief account of the child's behavior.

In general, then, non-parent adults tend to react to children on the basis of children's attractiveness levels

and these reactions are consistent with current cultural stereotypes of attractive and unattractive people. But, what about parents? Could even parents react in similar ways? We've all heard about the face only a mother could love. Could it be possible that not even parents can love <u>those</u> faces? Previous research on these questions is very sparce and the early evidence is only weak at best. Parke and his colleagues (Note 1) discovered greater responsiveness to newborns by parents when those newborns were judged attractive rather than unattractive. Apparently, only <u>some</u> babies are the "Gerber baby" and receive more behavioral attention for their looks!

Further, Adams (and LaVoie, 1974; and Crane, 1980) has discovered that parents of elementary-school-age children do indeed rate attractive children as more popular and as having more positive personal attributes. Indeed, some of the parents in Adams' two studies have expressed the expectation and <u>preference</u> that their own children chose attractive, rather than unattractive, friends.

Thus far, the scant research on parents' reactions to children varying in attractiveness provides only an indication that parents might differentially react to attractive and unattractive children. Our study focused directly on this issue. Further, we examined the extent to which children's gender moderated parents' attractiveness-based reactions. That is, it seems entirely possible that parents react differently to attractive and unattractive

boys and girls. Our a priori predictions were that when rating attractive children parents would show higher evaluations and greater expectations for these children than when rating unattractive children. Further, we suspected that gender-based differences in evaluations would also be present.

Our sample included 20 male and 33 female parents of preschool and elementary-school age children. A supplemental group of 38 male and 37 female non-parent adults were included for comparison purposes. All subjects were recruited from graduate and undergraduate classes in business, education and psychology at two commuter-typed universities in the southwest.

Each participant read four short dialogues to which a color photograph of a preschool child was attached. The subjects were then asked to rate each child using an attribution questionnaire.

The photos consisted of head and neck views of each child and all photos had been previously rated as attractive or unattractive by a group of four adult raters. Inter-rater reliability for attractiveness among the four rater was .75-.93. The photos, half male and half female, depicted children with fair hair, no obvious disgifurements and none of the children wore glasses. Finally, the photos were cropped to eliminate clothing cues.

The dialogues depicted children engaged in high or low rates of activity, friendliness, independence, aggression and honesty. All possible combinations of dialogues and photos were used.

The attribution questionnaire consisted of 36 adjectives each on a 1-5 Likert-type scale. The adjectives ranged from ratings of friendliness to carelessness to competitiveness. Moreover, the questionnaire included nine items which asked for expectations of the child's future success, such as school success, marital happiness and job satisfaction.

In our first set of data analyses we discovered that the responses of the parent and non-parent adults were esentially equivalent as were the responses of adult males and females. Consequently, we'll not focus on the very few differences that existed in analyses of these variables.

Analyses of variance on the ratings as a function of the dialogues, positive or negative, sex of child and attractiveness of child yielded numerous results. Of the 45 total ratings made by subjects, Dialogue main effects were found for 44 of the 45. These results indicated that the dialog manipulation worked as exected with children associated with positive behaviors receiving far higher ratings than those associated with negative behaviors.

Sex of child effects indicated that girls more often than boys were viewed as calm, happy, cooperative, good, kind,

pleasant and agreeable. In addition, girls were judged as more likely than boys to become good parents, be successful and happy in life and to make their parents proud. In contrast, boys were more often than girls judged as cruel, insensitive, unfriendly and restless. Apparently, sex-typing on the part of parents is alive and well!

But what about attractiveness? Indeed, attractiveness main effects were present, but were not as strong as we had anticipated. Unattractive girls were more often judged as understanding, friendly and neighborly. Attractive girls were more often judged as quiet. To our surprise, attractive boys were more often judged as less friendly. In contrast, as expected, unattractive boys were more often judged as aggressive, unpleasant and less likely to make good grades in school.

Attractiveness X Dialog interaction effects also emerged from the analyses. In general, when children were associated with positive dialogues, attractive children were rated more positively than unattractive children (e.g. less aggressive, etc.). However, when negative dialogues were examined, almost no differences based on attractiveness were present.

We then asked a similar, supplemental group of adults to simply rate the attractiveness of the photos used in the study. We found strong confirmation of the attractiveness levels of the pictured children.

Overall, our findings provide evidence that some, although not strong, differential attributions are made of attractive and unattractive preschoolers. In general, this evidence was most pronounced when dialogues were most positive: attractive children were viewed as especially good, etc., compared with unattractive children. When the dialogue was negative, however, the differences were erased. It appears that, at least for parents, attractiveness matters and counts when children act cooperatively and in non-aggressive, friendly manners. But, when children exhibit dishonest, cruel or anti-social behaviors, attractiveness becomes less important.

We must reiterate, however, that there are striking consistencies between our findings and those found in other investigations for teachers and other non-parent adults. For instance, parents, similar to earlier research, evaluated unattractive boys much lower than their attractive counterparts and viewed attractive girls as more quiet.

Interestingly, these ratings seem to mirror children's actual behaviors. That is, Langlois and Downs (1979) recently reported that unattractive children, especially boys, do indeed tend to exhibit more anti-social behaviors, at least with peers, and attractive girls tend to prefer less active, quiet games with peers. Thus, parents' ratings in the present study may reflect the actual behaviors of their attractive and unattractive children.

It is important to add a caution at this point. When we compare the overall pattern of findings in the present study with those produced in studies of non-parent adults, especially teachers, it appears that parents' reactions are less pronounced. In fact, their reactions seem mild compared to those of teachers. It may be that methodological factors in the present study muted parents' reactions. Clearly, addditional work which garners parents' reactions to their own children's behaviors, and actual observations of parent-child interaction based on the attractiveness levels of both parent and child is warranted.

The findings from the present study suggest that parents <u>are</u> making differential attributions based on attractiveness. Seemingly, those faces only parents could love may be loved a little less than those everyone loves. Only additional inquiry into this very important area will tell.